

Cheyenne Airfield
(Cheyenne Municipal Airport)
(Cheyenne Airport)
200 East 8th Avenue
Cheyenne
Laramie County
Wyoming

HAER No. WY-83

HAER
WYO
11-CHEY,
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
Rocky Mountain System Support Office
National Park Service
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
CHEYENNE AIRFIELD (CHEYENNE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, CHEYENNE AIRPORT) 7-

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: T14N-R66W, Section 30, S/SE/NW, SW/SW/NE,
W/NW/SE, NW/SW/SE
200 East 8th Avenue
Cheyenne
Laramie County, Wyoming

USGS Quad: Cheyenne North, Wyoming 7.5'

UTMS: 13/514950 mE/4555800 mN
13/515400 mE/4555800 mN
13/515350 mE/4555040 mN

Dates of
Construction: 1920-1980s

Present Owner: Cheyenne Airport Board

Present Use: Cheyenne Airport

Significance: The Cheyenne Airport played a vital role as a major component of the first transcontinental air mail and passenger route from the 1920s through World War II. A portion of the airport (the United Airlines Terminal Building, the United Airlines Hangar, and a memorial fountain) is designated as a National Register District. Three other buildings within the airport complex are considered eligible to the National Register, two of which may be included in an expanded National Register District in the future.

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II. HISTORY

Commercial aviation in the United States dates from January 1920, when the Post Office Department announced plans to extend the airmail route from Chicago to San Francisco. At this early date, aircraft were limited to altitudes of nine to ten thousand feet. Therefore, a route was chosen that followed the right-of-way of the Union Pacific Railroad, which avoided high altitude mountainous country.¹

The City of Cheyenne actively sought to become a stop on this transcontinental airmail route and constructed a landing field on 200 acres of land north of the downtown area. The field was little more than a level area where holes and ditches had been filled in and a small wooden hangar was constructed. Cheyenne became one of fifteen nationwide stations to service the airmail route. It was classified as a division point between Omaha and Salt Lake City with six planes and pilots and nine employees for maintenance and administration. Service was inaugurated at the Cheyenne Airfield on September 8, 1920.²

The Airmail or Kelly Act of 1925 transferred all airmail routes to private carriers, and the City of Cheyenne received all buildings and improvements at the airfield in 1927. The Air Commerce Act of 1926 stimulated aviation investment by providing subsidies for developmental and operating costs. The airlines that were established as a result of these two acts sought to carry passengers as well as mail. The Boeing Airplane Company of Seattle was awarded the airmail contract from Chicago to San Francisco in July 1927, under the name of the Boeing Air Transport Company. In July 1929, the name changed to United Aircraft and Transport Company, and the Cheyenne Airfield was chosen as the main overhaul base. Starting with an initial work force of seventy-five men, the number of employees grew to over five hundred in the next few years. This central maintenance center was used to periodically overhaul the Boeing B-40 single-engine biplane, and by 1929 the B-80 tri-motor plane, which could carry the mail and fourteen passengers. The company introduced the use of stewardesses to serve the needs of the passengers in that same year.³

The Cheyenne Airfield continued to grow with the addition of the contract feeder line to Denver and Pueblo. Western Air Express, the forerunner of Western Air Lines, inaugurated service in December 1927. Airport facilities were steadily improved. The original wooden hangar burned in November 1924, and it was replaced with four brick hangars in 1925. In 1929,

a two-story brick passenger terminal was constructed east of the hangars. In 1930, a large hangar was constructed north of the terminal; this became the United Airlines hangar in 1931. A paved plane parking ramp was built in 1930, but the landing field was still prairie sod. Over 400 radio range finding stations were added to the nation's air routes. The Cheyenne station was located one mile west of the airport at Fort D.A. Russell and provided a fix for the east-west runway. In addition, the Weather Service was moved from the downtown area to the Cheyenne Airport.⁴

The United Aircraft and Transport Company was a holding company for Boeing Airplane Company, Boeing Air Transport, Pacific Air Transport, and the Pratt and Whitney Company. In 1931, it became United Air Lines, and by 1933 all major maintenance and overhaul facilities had been consolidated and moved to Cheyenne. Therefore, by the early 1930s, Cheyenne had become one of the most important cities serving the air industry and had "...the largest aircraft overhaul maintenance base in the world."⁵ United Air Lines introduced the new twin-engine Boeing 247 in 1933 and the Douglas DC-3 in 1936. The new planes were faster, safer, and more comfortable for passenger travel but were still limited in altitude. By 1935, United Air Lines had twelve arrivals and departures every twenty-four hours east and west out of the Cheyenne Airport. Western Air Lines had four arrivals and departures daily on their north-south line.⁶

During World War II, Cheyenne became a key war support location due to Fort Francis E. Warren (formerly Fort D.A. Russell) and the United Air Lines facilities. United Air Lines also transferred its flight training division to Cheyenne in 1942. The school trained pilots for crew duty and had a constant enrollment of about one hundred students.⁷ The Army Corps of Engineers built a concrete runway and taxiway system in 1942, extending the east-west runway to 8000 feet.⁸

During this time period, facilities were added to the Cheyenne Airport along the east side of Evans Avenue. The Municipal Hangar for Inland Air Lines was constructed in 1938 with a one-story addition built the following year. Also, a hangar for Plains Airways was constructed in 1940, as well as a building for the Wyoming Aircraft School (no longer standing). Other buildings constructed during World War II in the same area were the Plains Restaurant and an Ambulance Service Building, both of which have been razed. Finally, a brick building for the Ideal Laboratory Tool and Supply Company was constructed between 1941-1945.⁹

When the Armed Forces sought a location for a plant to modify its B-17 bombers during World War II, Cheyenne was the logical choice because of the existing United Air Lines maintenance facilities and the Cheyenne Airport's strategic location on the major transcontinental air route. Under defense contracts with the Army-Air Force, the United Air Lines Modification Center made the last minute changes to the B-17 bombers headed from the West Coast factories to the air battlefronts. Workers there installed cheek guns, rebuilt tail assemblies, manufactured over four million assorted airplane parts, installed gun mounts and camouflaged the bombers for the different war theatres. Since many of the required modifications were continually changing to suit varying war conditions and strategies, the Cheyenne facility enabled factory assembly lines to carry on production without interruption.¹⁰

The Cheyenne Modification Center was built on the north side of the airport and consisted of two large hangars, four units of nose hangars, an electric air and heating unit, a cafeteria, a garage, a boiler house, a 500,000-gallon water storage reservoir, a guard house, a target butt for testing the guns, and a control house. New taxiways were also constructed, linking the facilities with existing runways.¹¹

At its peak, the Cheyenne Modification Center employed 1642 workers on three shifts and therefore represented one of Cheyenne's largest industries. Nearly half of the workers were women.¹² After the war, the government leased the Modification Center to United Air Lines, which then made an agreement with the City of Cheyenne to move its machinery and facilities from its overhaul and repair base at the airport to the Modification Center.¹³

However, in the fall of 1947, United Air Lines began moving its maintenance facilities to San Francisco. The flight training division was moved to Denver. Although the removal of these facilities was a blow to Cheyenne's economy, United Air Lines did move its Stewardess Training School to Cheyenne in 1947, where it remained until 1961 when it was moved to Chicago. After 1950, most of the buildings that comprised the Modification Center became the headquarters of the Wyoming Air National Guard.¹⁴

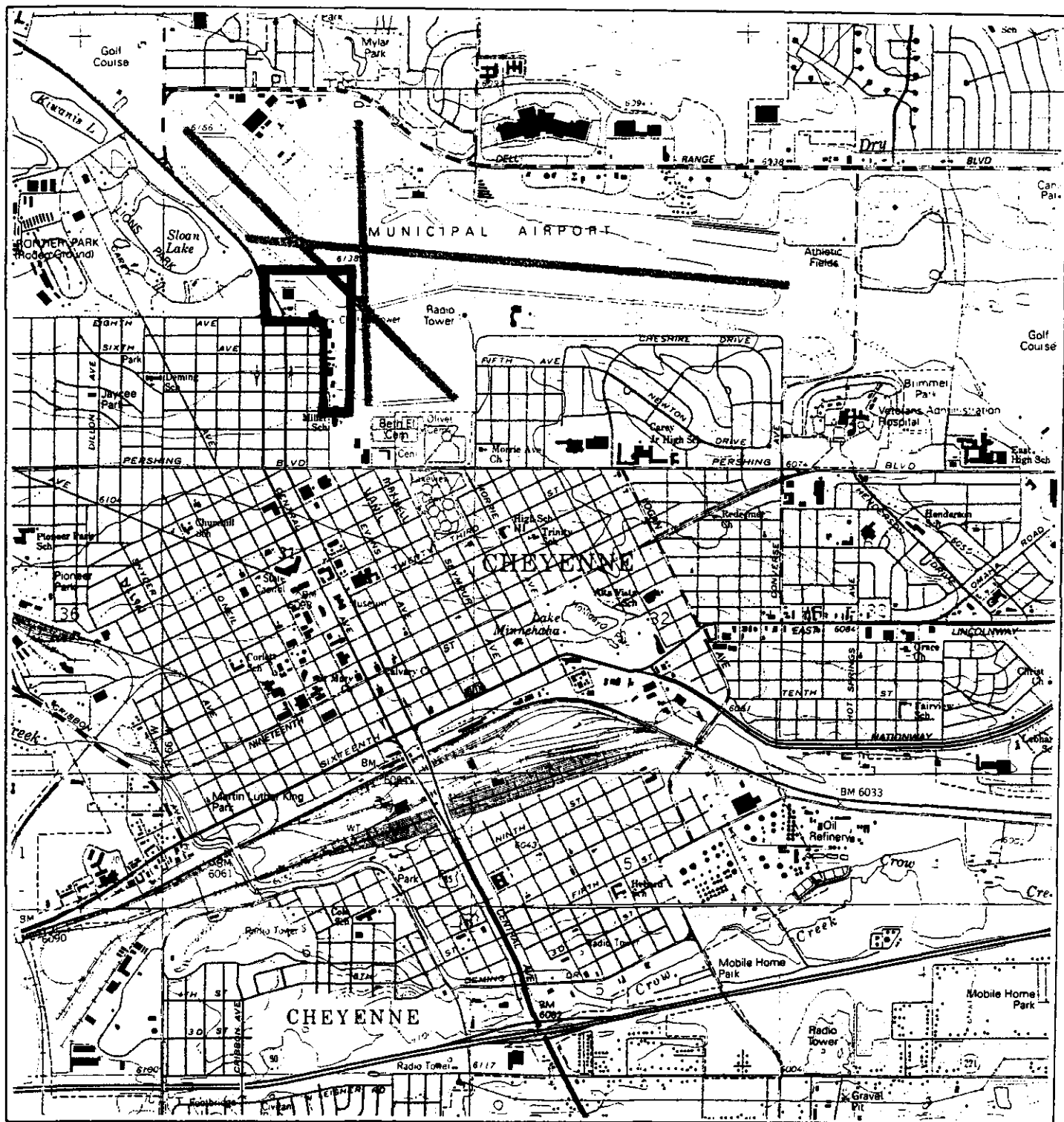
The chief reason for Cheyenne's decline as an aviation center was the improved technology in the air industry. As early as May 1939, the new four-engine DC-4 was tested at the Cheyenne Airport. It was capable of flying non-stop from Chicago to California at 210 miles per hour. More

importantly, it could fly at an altitude of 18,000 feet and could therefore carry its forty-two passengers safely over the highest peaks in the Rocky Mountain chain. Although World War II delayed Cheyenne's decline as an air industry center, soon afterwards it was eclipsed by Denver. Cheyenne's small population did not generate sufficient passenger traffic, and it was no longer needed as an enroute service station. Lastly, the new higher flying planes no longer needed the old Union Pacific and pioneer air mail route upon which Cheyenne was located.¹⁵ United Air Lines left Cheyenne altogether in the 1960s. Western Air Lines discontinued service on the north-south route in 1979. Rocky Mountain Airways continued to serve the City of Cheyenne. Later, passengers were served by Continental Express and United Express. After December 1994, only United Express continued to operate out of Cheyenne.

III. ENDNOTES

1. Gerald Adams, "The Air Age Comes to Wyoming," Annals of Wyoming 52 (Fall 1980):21-22.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 25-26; Frank J. Taylor, High Horizons: Dare-Devil Flying Postmen to Modern Magic Carpet--The United Air Lines Story (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1951), pp. 28-29.
4. Ibid., 26-27; Centennial Historical Committee, Cheyenne The Magic City of the Plains (Cheyenne: Centennial Historical Committee, 1967), p. 80.
5. Ibid., p. 27.
6. Ibid., p. 27; Roger D. Launius and Jessie L. Embry, "Cheyenne versus Denver: City Rivalry and the Quest for Transcontinental Air Routes," Annals of Wyoming 68 (Summer 1996):18.
7. The Wyoming Eagle, 21-24 July 1942.
8. Centennial Historical Committee, Magic City, p. 80.
9. Cheyenne Airport, Real Property Records, Building Plans and Specifications, and Airport Layout Maps (Cheyenne: Cheyenne Airport, Airport Layout Plans dated 1941, 1943, 1945, 1950).

10. T.A. Larson, Wyoming's War Years, 1941-1945 (Laramie: University of Wyoming, 1954), pp. 247-248; The Wyoming Eagle, 24 March 1944.
11. War Department, Industrial Facilities Inventory. Modification Center No. 10, Cheyenne, Wyoming (Denver: U.S. Engineer's Office, February 1944), pp. 1, 25.
12. Ibid., pp. 1-2, 64.
13. City of Cheyenne, City Clerk Contract Book Nos. I-II. Contract No. 634, 636 (Cheyenne: City Clerk's Office).
14. Ibid., City Clerk Contract Book No. II. Contract Nos. 700, 701.
15. Adams, Air Age, pp. 28-29; Launius and Embry, "Cheyenne versus Denver," pp. 22-23.



Portion of Cheyenne North and Cheyenne South USGS quadrangles, showing location of Cheyenne Airport.